

## Capability Toolkit

### Skills to support managers and individuals

Very few of us choose to perform our work badly, make mistakes or fail to complete tasks. There are often good reasons why an individual is struggling at work, such as problems with colleagues or at home, ill health or other personal issues. Alternately they may not have received the necessary training and support they needed when starting a new job or receiving a promotion. It may be that the individual's skills and abilities are just not suited to the area of work they are in but they would thrive in other areas. It is important that the individual shares their concerns as early as possible with their manager in order to get the support they need to perform successfully.

It can be very difficult and challenging to accept when we are underperforming and to know how to tackle it. The primary purpose of the Capability Policy is to ensure that individuals receive the support needed to help them to improve their performance to the standard required. Individuals are encouraged to share with their managers any underlying causes that might be affecting them and what support, advice or training they may need to improve.

This toolkit aims to be helpful both to managers in supporting the performance of their direct reports and to all employees wishing to improve their performance at work. It has been developed as a resource to dip in to and out of so may not be relevant to all situations or individuals at all times.

A helpful online resource '**Challenging conversations and how to manage them**' can be found on the ACAS website: <http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=3799>. It includes guidance on how to prepare for and handle a difficult conversation, including the stages of the meeting.

In this toolkit the following areas are included:

#### A Managing capability

- 1) Template Performance Improvement Plan
- 2) Self-review of performance and development
- 3) Key principles for capability meetings
- 4) Giving feedback
- 5) Receiving feedback
- 6) Handling challenging conversations including stages of a meeting
- 7) Handling emotions

#### B Further relevant information

- 8) Management styles
- 9) Learning styles and development activities
- 10) Setting performance standards
- 11) Setting objectives

## Toolkit Section A: Managing Capability

### 1) Template Performance Improvement Plan

<b>Target area</b> <i>Detail specific area where performance standards have not been met</i>	<b>Performance concern</b> <i>Detail specific dates and examples of where the standards have not been met</i>	<b>Expected standard of performance</b> <i>Detail what is expected of the employee in terms of their performance i.e. what does 'good' look like</i>	<b>Agreed improvement actions</b> <i>Detail what actions need to be taken to meet expected standard of performance</i>	<b>Support</b> <i>Detail what has been agreed in terms of support required to achieve the expected standard of performance</i>	<b>Review Date</b>	<b>Review notes</b> <i>Detail improvement made and any future review dates</i>	<b>Date to achieve expected standard</b>
<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Organisational skills - difficulty organising workload on a daily basis.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Two deadlines missed (insert details) and complaint received from Department X who did not receive a response to an email sent twice on (insert dates).	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> To effectively manage workload on a daily basis, meet deadlines efficiently, prioritise tasks and respond to emails in a timely manner.  Measured by management observation of performance of tasks.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Operate daily 'To Do' check list and a diary. To respond to emails received within 3 working days.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Training in Outlook task lists and calendar.  To work shadow colleague Y in prioritising her daily tasks.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> To be reviewed in 4 weeks (insert date).	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Outlook training completed on (insert date), daily to do lists being written. Responding to emails faster, but further improvement needed. Work shadowing will continue. Review in 2 weeks.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Standard expected to be achieved within 8 weeks (insert date)
<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Accuracy – in research data.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Repeated inaccuracy of research data (insert details) involving typing errors when transferring raw	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> To produce accurate data and to enable meaningful analysis and for research publications.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Employee to double check own work before submission, Keeping records of research carried out to refer to. Supervisor to also check data against records.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Further training in writing research papers and handling complex data. Time management training.	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> To be reviewed during next research project (insert date)	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Training attended and applied effectively in day to day work (give specific	<b>EXAMPLE:</b> Standard expected to be achieved within 6 months (insert date)



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	data into reports.					examples). Accurate data produced for new research project enabling meaningful analysis (insert details).	

<b>This action plan has been agreed by:</b>		
	<b>Signed</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Manager</b>		
<b>Employee</b>		

## 2) Self-review of performance and development

All of us as employees have the responsibility to perform our duties to an acceptable standard and to seek to improve where our performance falls below the standards required. Managing your own performance effectively is about setting targets, planning and prioritising your work, seeking feedback and support when required and regularly reflecting and assessing how well you are doing.

Ideally on a regular basis, but particularly where performance issues are apparent, individuals can use self-reflection and assessment to review and identify any positive actions they can take to enhance their performance. Reflection allows you to review, think about, rehearse and ultimately improve your work performance. It may also assist you in seeking feedback, support or advice from your manager or other colleagues. The outcomes of structured reflection might include new and improved ways of doing things, the development of a new skill, the resolution of a problem or the consolidation of learning.

By asking yourself a series of open questions you can review your own learning, mistakes and successes. For example, after completing a particular piece of work or activity, consider the following:

- **What did you do?**

Think back over the detail of the work or activity you were tackling. What did you do well and why? What did you not do so well and why? Review the final product or outcome; was it the best you could have done; why? Consider any feedback that you received and recognise your achievements.

- **What have you learnt?**

Try to look beyond the specific task or activity you undertook and think about the less tangible outcomes. What additional skills have you acquired? What have you learnt about yourself and what sorts of strategies worked or didn't work well for you? What might you do differently next time? What development would help you to do it more effectively next time and how can you achieve this?

- **How will you apply that learning to your next task?**

Try to identify the general principles you have learnt and apply them to new situations. Becoming more aware of the process of learning and the skills you have used will allow you to build on your knowledge and skills in tackling different but related tasks.

If you identify an area that needs to change or be improved, aim to use a positive and proactive problem-solving approach i.e. look at the possible causes and consider all the possible options before deciding what to do. The following questions may help you to look at the wider picture.

- What is the background to this situation?
- What is the key problem? Is my view the same as others'?
- Do I have all the information I need? What assumptions am I making? Where could I get more information?
- How would the situation look once it is improved?
- What are the possible options?
- Who could give me more suggestions for my options?
- Who can help me to decide what to do?
- What support will I need to make the changes?

### 3) Key principles for capability meetings

The following principles may be helpful for managers conducting informal or formal capability meetings to ensure that the meeting is constructive and well received by the employee. The goal is to work together to ensure performance is improved within a supportive and constructive working relationship.

- approach it positively and calmly
- prepare before you meet to be clear about your key points and desired outcomes
- be open, honest and unambiguous
- be sensitive, the employee may not know there is a problem
- be factual and give examples, do not express personal opinion
- be specific and avoid generalisations
- ask open questions to enable the employee to effectively self-review and identify options for improvement
- listen to the employee and take what they say on board
- use a friendly tone and open body language
- ensure a problem-solving approach, seek to identify all possible options and agree the best plan for improvement
- focus on future improvement
- check for understanding and record the agreed actions
- plan when you will meet again to review and discuss the actions

### 4) Giving feedback

Feedback can play a significant role in improving performance. Feedback is the sharing of information on an employee's performance with them and on what is required to perform well in the future.

- Positive feedback serves to sustain and reinforce effective performance and is very important to ensure the individual is clear regarding what they are doing well.
- Negative or corrective feedback serves to change performance that is inappropriate or ineffective
- Both should be constructive and lead to positive change in performance or behaviour

Managers may shy away from providing corrective feedback, because they dislike negative interactions and may lack the skills or confidence to deliver it effectively. In addition, if a manager does not give feedback this can:

- mislead the employee by giving the impression that there is no problem
- prolong the problem or allow it to get worse
- deny the employee the chance to improve or put things right
- damage the productivity and efficiency of your business
- lower the morale amongst team members.

Giving feedback is critical in improving an individual's performance and with practice can be incorporated comfortably and quickly into regular interactions with employees. The principles below may assist managers in providing corrective feedback.

#### Key principles for giving feedback

- Feedback should be given at an appropriate time as soon as possible after the event, and when the recipient is not distracted by emotion or other commitments
- Keep your voice calm and your expression relaxed
- Feedback should be factual and not based on opinions or assumptions
- Use open and probing questions that help the recipient to review the situation and seek possible solutions e.g. What may have caused this to happen? What ideas do you have? What can I do to help you solve this? What could you do differently?



- Solutions must relate to behaviour and outcomes that the recipient has the power to influence or change
- Agree and record solutions. Don't impose your solutions unless you really have to.
- Be specific and concentrate on what actually happened, avoid using 'always' and 'never':

<b>Don't say (generalised statements)</b>	<b>Do say (specific examples)</b>
You are always making mistakes	There are three mistakes in this piece of work
You tend to shout at people	I noticed at last week's meeting that you shouted somewhat aggressively at Jim when he...
You never meet your deadlines	You've missed the monthly deadline six times this year so far, on each occasion by at least two days
Your work is not up to scratch - you'll have to pull your socks up	This piece of work falls short of the standard we require because...
You have a negative attitude towards the rest of the staff	What do you think you could do to improve your working relationship with your colleagues?

### **A useful model for giving feedback about performance or behaviour**

When discussing some particular feedback:

1. Clarify: the performance or behaviour you expect to see
2. Explain: the performance or behaviour that you actually see
3. Discuss: two-way discussion of the situation and the difference between expected and actual behaviour, use open questions to fully clarify and understand the causes and to discuss possible solutions
4. Agree: decide and record what will be done improve the situation
5. Review: make a time to meet to review the results, give feedback and follow-up any further changes that could be made

Remember to balance positive and negative feedback. Positive feedback on its own allows no room for improvement and negative feedback on its own can be discouraging. Feedback should be a motivating factor, leading to improvements in performance or behaviour and more satisfaction in the role

## **5) Receiving feedback**

When it is given and received well, feedback is one of the most useful tools in improving work performance and for feeling recognised and valuable in your role. Both giving and receiving feedback are skills that can be practised and developed, otherwise we may miss the opportunity to listen and act upon what may be very helpful information.

Here are some tips for getting the most out of the feedback you receive, particularly if it in relation to making improvements or changes:

- Approach it positively and calmly. Breathe deeply and don't be defensive.
- Actively listen to the feedback. You will hear more by concentrating on listening rather than explaining or justifying yourself immediately. You should have the chance to give your thoughts about the situation too.
- Ask for specific examples and clarification if what is being said is unclear. This will help to ensure that you understand exactly what is being said and any actions expected as a result.
- Consider the feedback and the ways you can address it. Do you need time to think about it? Is the feedback accurate? What could you do differently? What support might you need? Are there any other underlying issues?
- If there is anything your manager can do to help you, ask them.



- Keep a written record of the key points. This can be used for later reflection, action planning and review and help you to have an accurate and objective overview of the feedback.
- Thank the person who is giving you feedback. Constructive negative feedback can be the most helpful and the difficult to give.
- Return to the conversation to review, clarify and/or discuss further improvement options.

## 6) Handling Challenging Conversations

### 6.1 Preparing for a challenging conversation

Talking face to face with an employee about issues or problems you both feel strongly about will take many managers out of their comfort zone. You may be worried that the meeting will turn into a confrontation or that it will not go as planned. This sense of anxiety is a very natural response to a challenging situation but it can be overcome by careful planning, preparation and practise

Before the meeting you need to prepare

- establish the facts
- reflect on what you know about the individual
- decide what questions you will ask the individual to help them reflect on their performance or behaviour
- check relevant policies and seek support if you need it
- plan the meeting and be clear what you are aiming to achieve
- be prepared to listen and react calmly and professionally.

During the meeting use supportive and encouraging gestures, such as nods of the head and smiles

- Make eye contact: look at the speaker directly without staring
- Take notes: jot down key words and use these for later questions
- Look interested by facing the speaker, altering your facial expression and staying relaxed and calm
- Ask questions – but try to avoid interrupting.

### 6.2 Model outline of the stages of a meeting about capability:

*Introduction – set the right tone*

- Begin the conversation by explaining the purpose of the meeting
- Set out the structure of the meeting
- Agree standards of behaviour required during the meeting
- Adopt a calm and professional manner
- Reassure them about confidentiality – both prior to and after the meeting.

Use the feedback model given above to work through the following stages.

*State what the issues are and give evidence*

- Tell them what the problem is using your knowledge of the situation
- Give specific examples and refer to dates, documents, work or specific interactions
- Explain the impact the problem is having on the individual, the team and the organisation.

*Ask for an explanation*

- Listen to what they have to say – they may need to let off steam
- Keep an open mind and don't jump to conclusions
- Acknowledge their position and any mitigating circumstances
- Introduce your questions and explore the issues together.

*Agree a way forward*

- Ask the employee for proposals to resolve the situation
- Discuss the options
- Make a decision about the best solution and agree actions and timescales
- Arrange a follow up meeting

### **After the meeting**

Record any agreement and give a copy to the employee. This should set out:

- agreed outcomes with dates and standards required
- any support or training to be provided by the manager
- any consequences if the agreement is breached.
- how you will monitor and feedback on progress and continue to provide support where agreed.

Finally, remember to focus on the behaviour rather than the person and to remain objective and non-judgemental at all times.

## **7) Handling emotions**

The following principles may be helpful for managers when handling challenging conversations.

- Remain calm but show your concern
- Give the employee time to speak and express themselves
- Acknowledge the employee's emotions and show empathy as appropriate
- Actively listen to the employee with understanding
- Let the employee feel heard by repeating back what they have said to you but in your own words e.g. "John, if I understand you correctly, you are angry because you feel you haven't been given enough support on the new IT system and you feel frustrated because you expected me to do more than I have done when you raised this matter with me last month, is that correct?"
- Try to be comfortable with silence and try not to interrupt silence when it occurs.
- Be aware of your body language and your tone of voice. Make sure your body language is not confrontational (finger pointing, hands on hips), dismissive (eye rolling) or defensive (arms crossed). Stay out of the employee's personal space and avoid physical contact even if it's meant to be reassuring.
- Retain control of the conversation. End the conversation if the employee is growing more and more agitated. Tell the employee you want to reschedule the discussion after a brief cooling-off period, when the conversation can be more productive.
- Take time later to reflect on the discussion. Was the employee calmer when you finished, or more upset? What did you say or do that helped the situation or made matters worse? Reflecting on your words, actions and outcomes will help you be more effective next time and help you understand how to communicate effectively with this employee.



## Toolkit Section B: Further relevant information

### 8) Adapting Your Management Style to Enhance Performance

An effective manager can influence an employee's performance and development by adopting the right style of management to suit the individual and the situation. By adapting your style you can create a positive working environment for you and your team.

Firstly, the amount of direction and support a manager provides should depend upon the competence and commitment of the employee. For example an employee may be extremely experienced and capable, but may not have the confidence or motivation to carry out the task alone. The table below shows how an employee's competence and commitment can vary. It is worth considering which of these categories an employee falls in to when supporting their performance.

Development level	Description
High Competence High Commitment	Experienced at the job, and comfortable with their own ability to do it well. May even be more skilled than the manager.
Moderate/high Competence Variable Commitment	Experienced and capable, but may lack the confidence to go it alone, or the motivation to do it well / quickly
Low/some Competence Low Commitment	May have some relevant skills, but won't be able to do the job without help. The task or the situation may be new to them. May have lost confidence and/or motivation if not making progress as quickly as anticipated.
Low Competence High Commitment	Generally lacking the specific skills required for the job in hand, but highly motivated to tackle it.

Development levels are also situational. An individual might be generally skilled, confident and motivated in their job, but may still be faced with a task requiring skills they don't possess and therefore require closer support and encouragement. Effective managers are versatile in being able to adapt their management or leadership style according to both the situation, and the competence and commitment of the individual being led. By adopting the right style to suit the employee's development and needs, performance is likely to rise at a faster rate, work gets done, and good working relationships are built.

### 9) Learning styles and development activities

Learning styles are the different ways in which individuals learn, which can vary from person to person. For example one person may prefer to learn collaboratively in a group setting whereas another person may prefer to work on their own and at their own pace. Some may enjoy learning by 'having a go' while others prefer reading about the new area before being shown it step by step. When considering training and development activities the individual's learning preferences should be taken into consideration.

Once you have identified a particular development area, remember that there a wide range of ways to achieve that development. Many learning activities can be more than just 'going on a course'. A range of possible activities are listed below. Try to be creative when considering development activities with individuals.

- go on a course
- work shadow or swap
- find a mentor or be a mentor for someone else
- reading/research
- observe/speak to 'an expert'
- be 'the expert' and teach someone else
- take opportunity to practise



- attend a meeting/event that you would not usually
- work on a project with others
- delegation – done well this can provide many possibilities for development

If you do decide a course is the best activity to develop a skill or knowledge, consider different training formats which could include:

- Face to face training courses - which can suit those that prefer learning in a group setting.
- Online courses - which can suit those who prefer to learn on their own and at their own pace.
- On the job training - such as shadowing and learning from a colleague.
- Blended training courses - which provide a blend of online a face to face learning.
- Online seminars - which can provide opportunity to access the course without the need to attend in person.

### **How to ensure the development is effective**

Once the development activity has been planned it is important to have a discussion before and after:

- Before - to highlight the objectives and any identify key aspects to focus on.
- After – reflect and discuss how the new skill can be put into practice and any further relevant opportunities as appropriate.

## **10) Setting performance standards**

In taking forward a capability matter a manager must be clear and able to demonstrate three main points: the standards expected of the employee; that the employee was aware of those standards; and that the employee fell short of those standards.

The standards may be obvious and implicit (e.g. letters sent out from this University must have a high standard of literacy) or they may be made explicit (e.g. the specification for a workshop task may specify the margin of tolerance permitted; the standard procedure for an office dealing with student enquiries may stipulate that all letters are acknowledged on the day of receipt). The job description is also a helpful reference point and any local manuals, service level agreements etc.

### **Consider the following key points:**

What standards are required to support the work of your team?

How are they determined?

How are they set out or documented?

Are they reasonable and up to date?

How and when are they communicated?

Are they clear and understandable to everyone?

How are they monitored?

Making the employee aware of the standards involves more than setting out standards at the start of the employment and then waiting to see how the employee meets them. After a careful recruitment and selection procedure to try to ensure that the applicant can do what is needed, careful induction and probation procedures should be followed and consideration given to training in any non-standard skills required. In the first few months regular monitoring is also important to pick up on areas where improvement may be needed, and facilitate learning in those areas. The employee needs to know if at any stage they are under performing and then be given the opportunity to improve their performance, i.e. reach the standard required.

## 11) Setting SMART objectives or goals

Objectives are used in all areas of your life and work and may be short term to do with tasks you are working on, or longer term work or development objectives. Being SMART gives a framework to help set clear and well-defined objectives. They should be set at the correct level to motivate - not so big they feel impossible, or so small they are not challenging. Once you have identified what needs to be achieved, you can check that you record it in a SMART way. Please also see the template Performance Improvement Plan.

**Specific** - Specific goals are clear and have greater chances of being accomplished than general goals. Specific goals explain exactly what is expected and why is it important.

**Measurable** – Decide clear criteria for success. When you measure progress, it helps the staff member to stay on track, reach their target dates, and experience the exhilaration of achievement that spurs them on to continued effort required to reach their goal.

To determine if the goal is measurable, ask questions such as.....How much? How many? How often? How will we know when it is accomplished?

**Achievable** - To be achievable, a goal must represent an objective toward which the staff member is both *willing* and *able* to work. Set goals which challenge and stretch (but provide the support they need to achieve them!).

**Relevant** - Goals must be clearly linked to performance objectives of the individual/team and the job they are required to do.

**Timed** – Goals should have a target date. A commitment to a timeframe helps focus efforts on completion of the goal on or before the due date. This can also help to prevent goals from being overtaken by other day-to-day priorities.